

May 27, 2020

Greetings dear people of the St. Ansgar community!

There is a verse from the prophet Jeremiah that has been popping up in a couple of different places recently, so much so that it feels like a centering verse for this difficult time we are in right now:

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you . . . and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7).

Another version of this sentiment is one we know well in Christian community, for it comes from the one we follow. Jesus proclaims in the gospel of Mark, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mk. 12:31). And it is this love of one another that defines who we are as a people of God. As it is written in the gospel of John, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

This commandment to love our neighbor has been central to our action as a community to stay at home, away from in-person worship and other activities at the church in order to protect the most vulnerable and help stop the spread of COVID-19.

Unfortunately, this healthcare crisis continues, and all churches, businesses, and other avenues for public engagement are entering into times of reassessment to determine when – and how – we might return to some of our in-person activities. Maine and other states in New England are beginning to act on a phased reopening of our communities. This was the appropriate time for us as a congregation to consider what is next for our community.

After careful assessment of the current situation in Portland, and using the wisdom of state and national resources, as well as those provided by the ELCA and the New England Synod, what follows is the beginning of our next steps together.

Worship at St. Ansgar

The Council has decided that **in-person worship at St. Ansgar will continue to be suspended, at least until July 1st**. The **primary motivation** behind this careful and cautious move is that most of the phases of staged reopening continue to strongly suggest that **those who could be the most seriously impacted by COVID-19 continue to shelter in place**. These are those in the higher-risk groups of persons over the age of 60, those who have existing healthcare concerns that render them immune-compromised, and those who have a member of their household who fall into these categories. **Currently, over 50% of the gathered community at St. Ansgar falls into the at-risk groups**. As was put so well in a document produced by the Maine Council of Churches, "and if we push too far too fast by reopening our buildings and resuming in-person gatherings prematurely, we may unfairly force church members and clergy who are in at-higher-risk groups . . . to choose between keeping themselves or their loved ones safe and participating in congregational life."

Our **secondary motivation** is that **many of the things we long to return to in-person** – the very hallmarks of our worshiping life together – **would not be able to occur right away**. These are the elements of our sacramental life: singing, unison prayer, sharing the peace, communion, and coffee and conversation after worship.

Our life together as a “distributed congregation,” as one person named it, **will continue to center around our online worship** (currently Sunday morning, live worship via Zoom), **online community gatherings** (Coffee & Conversation), and **the connections you are fostering in your Pastoral Community Connection groups** with phone calls and email check ins.

In the next couple of weeks, Pastor Christophor will be working on new ways to connect and more offerings for at-home worship and prayer, ways that leverage the strengths of online media content and our long history of personal devotion and family spirituality. This will not only provide sustenance for this time in our journey, but also provide those seekers looking for spiritual connection creative, non-traditional ways to engage with us at St. Ansgar. These offerings will include mid-week worship times and self-directed, at-home prayer and study for the whole family.

Church Meetings and other Congregational Gatherings

Because we are a small church with limited resources for the kind of consistent cleaning and disinfecting required to ensure safe usage, **we will continue to hold church-related meetings virtually for the foreseeable future**. Pastor Christophor and Church Administrator Libby Barrett will continue to work remotely, and approved building usage will be limited to collecting materials for worship leadership and preparation, recording of music at the church by the church musicians, and processing of mail by Pastor Christophor and treasurer Jim McDonough.

Outside Group Usage

The recommendation from Council is that we return to the model we exercised when in-person worship was first suspended (March 15), and **allow our 12-step meetings to return to St. Ansgar for in-person meeting**. This will be at their discretion, and require that they be self-sustaining when it comes to the need to clean and disinfect chairs and other surfaces after each usage. Due to requirements for social distancing and cross contamination control, **groups will be limited to 24 people total, and not utilize tables**. Our Sexton, Frank Smith, will continue to do a deeper cleaning of the public spaces in the building weekly in addition to the small groups’ usage.

While it would be a possibility for those groups of 24 or fewer, **we recommend to the music groups** that use our space (groups comprised of singing and wind-instrument ensembles) **that they not meet indoors for the safety of their participants** and growing evidence that both singing and wind-instrument playing increase the potential for spreading COVID-19. These groups could meet outside, weather permitting, and that option will be provided and the logistics addressed if any group would like to do that.

If you are like us, this plan doesn't feel exactly like the good news we are desperate for right now. As we have seen one another in various online or telephone ways, the longing to be together – to be about the liturgy, the work of the people – is so very real. No amount of virtual happy hours or digital bible study can make up for seeing one another's faces in person, hearing the swelling sounds of the organ, tasting this-weeks special bread, or being surrounded by the tight harmonies of our glorious singers and often surprised by the squeals of our little ones.

We see and hear your sadness. We share your lament. We mourn the loss of what was in the face of an uncertain tomorrow.

And we remember that we are a people that, having stood in the shadow of the cross, boldly proclaim that death will not have the final say. That new life will destroy that death. And that God is bringing forth something unexpected. A new heaven and a new earth, where

Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away. (Rev. 21:4)

Until we gather once again in the full glory of our embodied selves, we wish you peace in this difficult time, health for you and your loved ones, and a heaping share of the love of God.

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The following articles were used and referenced in the preparation of this reopening plan.

Article about Texas and Georgia churches that had to close again after reopening:

<https://www.click2houston.com/news/local/2020/05/20/churches-in-texas-and-georgia-close-indefinitely-after-many-test-positive-for-virus-following-long-awaited-reopening/>

ELCA Guide to Reopening:

https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Returning_to_In-person_Worship.pdf?_ga=2.147273335.1912970952.1590094263-1582926036.1589394398

Church Mutual Reopening Checklist: <https://p.widencdn.net/r87ip0/CM0308-2020-05-RC-Recommendations-for-a-Safe-Return-to-Worship>

May 20th communication from NE Synod Bishop, Rev. Jim Hazelwood:

<https://app.robly.com/archive?id=366d47bddbdaa44aa5f45985aeb94cfd&v=true>

May 19th communication from NE Synod Bishop, Rev. Jim Hazelwood:

https://app.robly.com/archive?id=6aabe1ba67d58f3d30b4642c91af594&v=true&utm_source=Robly.com&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NE+Synod+News&utm_content=08d254c09ed6faa878d37a1555179ba3

May 18th letter by Christian Century Editor, Rev. Peter Marty:

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/editor/publisher/churches-obsessed-their-right-reopen-are-missing-point?>

Guide to Reopening prepared by Maine Council of Churches:

<http://mainecouncilofchurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/At-the-Threshold-Congregations-Buildings-COVID-19-Recs-for-ME-Churches.pdf>

US Guidelines for Reopening:

<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/6840714/Guidelines.pdf>

Info about COVID-19 transmission (with reference to signing) by Associate professor of

Biology, UMass Dartmouth, Erin Bromage: <https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them>

Information about singing and COVID-19 from Vocologist Heather Nelson:

<https://www.drheathernelson.com/singingandcovid19>